

## **Climate change's denier-in-chief; Australian politician finds his contrarian moment as country's fires are tied to climate change**

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### **Body**

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Throughout Australia's devastating fire season, one Facebook page has rallied an angry public like no other, with more shares and comments than anything coming from the prime minister or the country's largest environmental groups.

That page belongs to Craig Kelly - a former furniture salesman who has spent a decade in Parliament setting himself up as the climate-change denier-in-chief.

Now, in Australia's dark hour, Kelly has found his moment.

As the country fears it is being condemned to a fiery future by heat and drought, Kelly has been gathering and goading a right-wing tribe under the banner of posts that shout in all caps: "Bush fires have nothing to do with 'climate change'" or "Beware of climate alarmists: Everything they tell you is a lie."

Kelly, 56, insists he is just trying to protect everyday Australians from higher energy prices and lost jobs in coal and other industries.

But with posts and comments on his Facebook page that cherry-pick data and encourage violence against environmentalists, he has emerged as the public face of a parallel universe - the potent force that helps keep the government, despite the wishes of a broad majority of Australians, from taking stronger action on climate change.

For other politicians, this is a time to show sympathy for the fire victims and promise help.

Kelly prefers pugilism. He argues that the fires are no worse than in the past, that arsonists and socialists are to blame for the blazes, that coal is winning, that Arctic ice is not melting - and that those who disagree are no better than the censors in Orwell's "1984."

"It's all rather nefarious," said Michael E. Mann, an American climate scientist on sabbatical in Australia, who was once a target of climate denialists. "The loyal soldiers of the fossil fuel industry like Kelly promote the talking points and incite a rabble."

Many Australians, even climate scientists, dismiss Kelly as a political Falstaff, outrageous if powerless. But his following has grown to include a wide swath of the country, including rural firefighters who share his Facebook posts, and his efforts have frequently aligned with Prime Minister Scott Morrison's attempts to steer people away from viewing the fires as a turning point for the country's approach on climate issues.

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Before Morrison started emphasizing that the best way to fight future fires would be through more preventive burning rather than serious action on global warming, Kelly was hammering the point. He blamed "green madness" and "climate alarmists" - a term used by U.S. President Donald Trump this past week in Davos, Switzerland - for exaggerating the role of climate change and preventing the defensive burns, even though fire officials have said the problem is resources and time, not politics.

Echoing Kelly's argument that cutting Australia's greenhouse gas emissions will not prevent fires, the prime minister has also moved straight on to rebuilding and recovery rather than addressing the public's concerns about the warming climate.

"It's a very cynical strategy based on the idea that the fires will end, the drought will be broken and people will move on," said John Hewson, a former leader of the centre-right Liberal party, to which Morrison and Kelly belong. The prime minister, he added, "is trying to be seen to be doing a lot, but he's actually doing very little."

Kelly and Morrison, who serve in adjoining districts with lots of churches, small apartments and workers in the trades, have each other to thank for where they are. Kelly and other right-wing lawmakers toppled Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in a 2018 party coup, making Morrison the new leader. Morrison then overruled the party's preference for a moderate alternative to Kelly, protecting his candidacy.

"He's the tail wagging the dog," said Tom Kristensen, an artist, climate activist and volunteer firefighter in Kelly's district who has closely tracked his Facebook posts. "He's part of a tiny minority that has too much power."

Australia's conservative media outlets, dominated by Rupert Murdoch, have helped. In 2012, two years after Kelly was first elected, he drew a flood of media attention after joining Abbott, another climate denialist who would soon become prime minister, in opposing a plan to put a price on carbon emissions, describing it as a "poisonous, toxic tax."

Since then, Kelly has made regular appearances on Jones's radio show, as well as on the Murdoch-owned Sky News, where he appeared on Tuesday night to talk climate.

"It's just political opportunism at its worst," Hewson said. "Sky, which is running its own anti-climate agenda, has been using him as a show pony. They can feed him lines and get him to say things."

Kelly has at times gone too far, even for his own party. Early this month, he brought his views on the fires to an interview on British television with Piers Morgan, the conservative commentator, who was so appalled that he called Kelly "disgraceful."

In response, some members of Morrison's cabinet tried to distance themselves from Kelly. David Littleproud, the minister for the drought, dismissed Kelly as a "sideshow" who "doesn't represent the views of the government."

After the debacle, Morrison called for a moratorium in his party on interviews with the international news media.

Nevertheless, Kelly embraced a lengthy interview with the New York Times, after announcing, "I have to be careful because the prime minister told us not to talk to international media."

Over the phone, Kelly argued that his enemies had called him a denier to make him sound like a Holocaust denier. Kelly, who has no college degree and no scientific expertise, said he agreed that temperatures had been rising since the 1970s, but added that the human contribution was "up for debate." (Scientists say this is not in dispute.)

He also insisted that the drought fuelling this season's fires was unrelated to climate change (though there is evidence that warming temperatures have been a major contributor, in part by pushing rainfall farther south). And he said that these fires were bad, but not that bad.

"People have forgotten our past - that we have had bush fires equivalent to this," he said.

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The reality is that this season's fires are unique for several reasons. They have covered a geographic spread beyond the fires of the past, in a year without El Nino conditions that usually accompany the country's worst fire seasons. And they began as Australia endured its hottest, driest year on record.

Several months after the blazes started, scorching subtropical rainforest in September, they have burned six million hectares, destroyed more than 2,000 homes and killed at least 29 people.

Those numbers are hard to find on Kelly's Facebook page.

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